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A Loyal Man

By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

GENERAL DEDYUKHIN KOSTROMA was very tired, too tired even to be greatly astonished. There were pouches under his bleak eyes, lines of weariness round his mouth. He was old and white-haired, and death was very close to him. He knew.

He had heard before of this league of exiles who dwelt in Paris and rendered justice, as opportunity came, to those who had betrayed the Tsar.

He had hardly even been surprised when the laughing, blue-eyed stranger had approached him on the lonely Montmartre street and forced an automatic against his side through the thickness of a heavy overcoat. He had gone with the man, of course, aware that, in spite of his disguise, his lack of beard and mustache, his generally aged appearance, no man who had known him could fail to recognize him. There was the stiffness of the old Imperial Army in his back, the saber cut still over his left brow.

He had been taken in a taxi to a gaunt stone house on the outskirts of Paris, ushered within to meet there members of this league of exiles. They had explained to him briefly, clearly, that they were the avengers of the old régime, and that sooner or later all traitors came to Paris and into their hands. They would dispose of him, but they would not humiliate him or shame him.

They had a way of arranging such matters, to each man a way that fitted him. He had been a soldier, a great soldier, and he would understand, later. It was useless to try to escape.

He did understand. The league was composed mostly of members of the old aristocracy, and they were gentlemen. He stood now in the center of the richly furnished room they had given him, leaning heavily on his ebony cane and surveying the garments arranged on the bed out of weary and life-tired eyes. They were all there, including even underclothes of silk, the full regalia of a general of the Imperial Army.

He hardly stirred when the door opened and a slender middle-aged man came in, clicking his heels and bowing. He was attired as an officer of staff—Cossack, the general saw. He explained carefully that he had been sent to valet the general. The general bowed. Would he care for vodka, wine, or a little brandy? They had some wonderful twenty-year-old cognac. . . . Ah, yes, a small brandy.

The valet disappeared and returned

with a silver tray on which were glasses and a slender-necked bottle. The general laid aside his cane, straightened and sipped the amber liquid. The valet assured him that his bath was ready.

HE WAS changed at last. He felt vastly better, a little more interested in life. This league of exiles had even supplied him with his decorations, with the jeweled orders he had received at the steps of the throne. It was as if the years fell away, as if he were back in the headquarters at Lemberg, on the eve of the great attack. Ah, the Tsar had lived then and Holy Russia had been well and strong. The valet murmured smooth words in his ear, and he nodded assent and strode from the room. Outside the door another man, in the uniform of a famous regiment, clicked his heels and saluted. Men were stationed all down the dim hallway: men in uniform, saluting. It was certainly like the headquarters at Lemberg, just as if the general walked to dinner with his brilliant staff behind him.

The dining-room was brilliantly lighted and sparkling with silver and cut glass. The general recognized some of the plate, fragments from the messes of famous regiments. Officers stood stiffly waiting his seating, and he strode calmly to the table head, dropped to his chair. There was a scraping of boot heels, a tinkling of medals, and the rest sat also. The dinner was served.

The general conversed politely with the men near him. There was soft laughter, the tinkling of glasses. There was no mention of the reason for all this mummerly. Everyone understood. It had been explained to the general when he first arrived. He was not greatly worried or bothered about the end. Life had not been too kind to him recently, and all men had misunderstood his actions. He looked quietly up and down the table. Some of the exiles he recognized.

There was Cheramis, whose father was a count and who had been colonel . . . now what was the regiment? . . .

And that tall, pale man . . . surely Berexoff, who had been on the staff at Lemberg. One or two others he thought he knew but could not be sure. His eyesight was not so good as it had been. They nearly all wore different uniforms. The Little Father save him, was this the remains of the Imperial Army, all who were loyal and alive?

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the table end rapped sharply at last. He talked quietly in thick Russian and lifted a glass to the picture of the Tsar that hung on the side wall. Men lifted up, spurs and medals tinkling, raising glasses. Automatically the general raised himself also and drank. He knew the rest were watching him closely, sneering a little, thinking him a hypocrite. But he drank because he was loyal to the toast.

THEY wouldn't understand that. They had accused him of delivering the Second Army Corps to the Bolsheviks. They had accused him of accepting the post of commissar at the city of Brodsk. That latter was true. But he had not delivered the Second Army Corps. It had been ready to transfer its loyalty, and the Tsar himself, warned of the trend of events, had sent a secret message to go over to the communist party and endeavor to trap them. Young Ivan had brought the message. And he had died somewhere during the Revolution. And General Kostroma had schemed and plotted with them, made believe he was with them, which was all the easier because he was peasant born and his wife was a thick-limbed, coarse-faced woman from the banks of Father Dnieper, by no stretch of imagination an aristocrat.

He fingered his glass and came to himself with a start. The officers were standing, looking at him. Berexoff, old Berexoff who had been on his staff, was approaching him, white-faced and stern. Berexoff clicked his heels and saluted.

"General, we have been at pains to adjust this matter. You will appreciate that. We have no more to say. We have

shown you these last courtesies because some of us have fought under you, followed you, know that for all you have done you were once a soldier. And as gentlemen we have tried to honor the soldier that was. Now we will leave you for half an hour, and when we return we will bring men to carry you away. We may not give you a farewell, a military burial, because that is reserved for those who have died loyal men. We are sorry it has come to this."

The general bent his head, and his old eyes were misty.

"I would like a flag, an old Imperial flag, to cover me. . . I have served the Tsar. . ." he said hesitatingly. Berexoff shook his head with real regret.

"The Imperial flag is for soldiers who—"

The general gestured, interrupting him, understanding what he was about to say. The Imperial flag was not to cover traitors. They had rendered him all the honor they felt called on to render. They had treated him like gentlemen, with tact and courtesy. He had to remain content. Still, it was hard. Denied even the flag at the last.

The general smiled thinly. So they were sorry it had come to this. Yes, the general was sorry too. It would do no good to explain to them. They wouldn't understand. They would only regard him with contempt, thinking he was trying to escape. He was a brave man. They were right there. He had not received all his medals because he was the Tsar's favorite soldier, as so many had done. He raised himself to his feet and bowed, first to Berexoff, then to the remaining officers. He smiled again, wearily. He had always tried to do his best.

He said clearly, "I thank you," and they wondered at his dignity and his courage.

Berexoff reached into a pocket and laid an automatic on the table. Then, with another salute, he withdrew. They all withdrew, leaving the general alone at the head of the table, alone with the picture of the Tsar smiling down on him. He laughed aloud then, but without mirth. He who had been faithful all his life was about to die as a traitor at the end.

IN THE hallway outside the dining-room the officers were gathered in little silent knots, faces tense, bodies rigid. No man met his companion's eyes, and the mind of each was fixed far away on past splendors, trying to remember as soldiers and gentlemen should all the best and none of the worst of the man they had left alone. The minutes ticked away, and presently there was a muffled hammering on the front door of the house. The officers stirred, looked at each other questioningly. Someone went to the door, and the sound of an excited voice drifted to the listening ears.

"It's Ivan, young Ivan," muttered Berexoff, relaxing. Then young Ivan was among them, his scarred face alight and eager, his hands twitching.

"Kostroma!" he panted, breathless, for he had run fast. "You have General Kostroma here!" They gathered round him, frowning, a little jarred by the loud interruption of a solemn moment.

"What of that, Ivan?" Berexoff snapped harshly.

Then Ivan laughed.

"I had word only a short time ago that you were feasting him here. . . preparing him as we have prepared the others. I hope I am in time. He must be honored and not shamed, the greatest loyalist of us all."

"Are you mad?" Berexoff snapped again. But young Ivan shook his head. "All of General Kostroma's actions were in accordance with secret orders that he received from the Tsar. . . before the Tsar died. This I swear. My word upon it. . . Am I too late?"

They regarded him with growing astonishment, dumfounded, amazed. Berexoff put out a suddenly trembling hand and touched him on the shoulder. "Secret orders from the Tsar. . . to play the traitor?"

"Aye, and to check the Bolsheviks at the proper time. But the Revolution came too fast for that."

"Ivan! You talk of hidden things. How do you know?"

Young Ivan drew himself to his full height and his face, terribly scarred because of what the Bolsheviks had done to him, was set and grim.

"The orders were secret, and I swore to keep them so. I swore to the Little Father himself. . . Nor have I spoken until to-night. But when I heard that you had General Kostroma here I came in haste, knowing that I must speak at last. . . I carried the secret orders to the general before Lemberg. He is a loyal man."

They all stood then, rigid and unmoving again for perhaps a minute, while the passionate, earnest voice of young Ivan rang in the hallway, young Ivan whom the general had thought of as dead. "He is a loyal man."

Then with an oath Berexoff turned and started toward the doorway of the dining-room. He stopped short in his tracks, and the others stopped short behind him as they all caught the muffled hammering sound of a shot. Young Ivan, hardly understanding yet that he was too late, repeated stupidly, "He is a loyal man."

Berexoff straightened and breathed deeply. He grated out harsh orders and an officer started, gaped a little and then disappeared back down the hallway. When he returned there shimmered over his arm the silken folds of the Imperial flag. Berexoff nodded. They all nodded. It was all they could do now. The Imperial flag to cover a loyal man.

